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ABSTRACT

A retention plan was developed to quantify and qualify the attrition problem and to establish action plans to improve retention for a regional university serving many nontraditional students. Cameron University, a state institution in Oklahoma, provides both associate and bachelor degree programs. The attrition problems were difficult to identify because of the large number of students who attend college on a part-time basis, who work full-time, who attend for purposes other than to graduate, and who depart the area primarily for employment reasons. The first step was to develop a student profile before assuming an attrition problem, and to determine students' reasons for attendance. Attention was also directed to: students' association with the military and their work status, the ratio of freshmen to seniors, and reasons for student attrition based on a survey of nonreturning students. It was concluded that the university needs to undertake aggressive retention actions to stem the attrition problem. Among the components of the retention plan are the following: improving the quality of life, revising student advisement, creating a basic skills program, and establishing a retention database. A questionnaire is appended. (Author/SW)

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RETENTION PLAN

ACTION PLANS TO RETAIN TRADITIONAL AND NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS AT A REGIONAL UNIVERSITY

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Presented at the Twenty Third Annual Association for Institutional Research Forum

Toronto, Ontario, Canada
May 1983

ABSTRACT.

An overall retention plan was developed to quantify and qualify the attrition problems and to establish specific courses of action to improve retention for a regional university. This regional university performs both senior college and community college roles with a large number of non-traditional students in attendance. The attrition problems were difficult to identify because of the large number of students who attend college on a part-time basis, who work full-time, who attend for purposes other than to graduate and who depart the area primarily for employment reasons. The methodology and the action plans considered the differing needs of the traditional and non-traditional students.

THE ASSOCIATION FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

This paper was presented at the Twenty-Third Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held at the Sheraton Centre in Toronto, Ontario, May 23-26, 1983. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of Forum papers.

D. R. Coleman, Chairman
Forum Publication
Advisory Committee

RETENTION PLAN

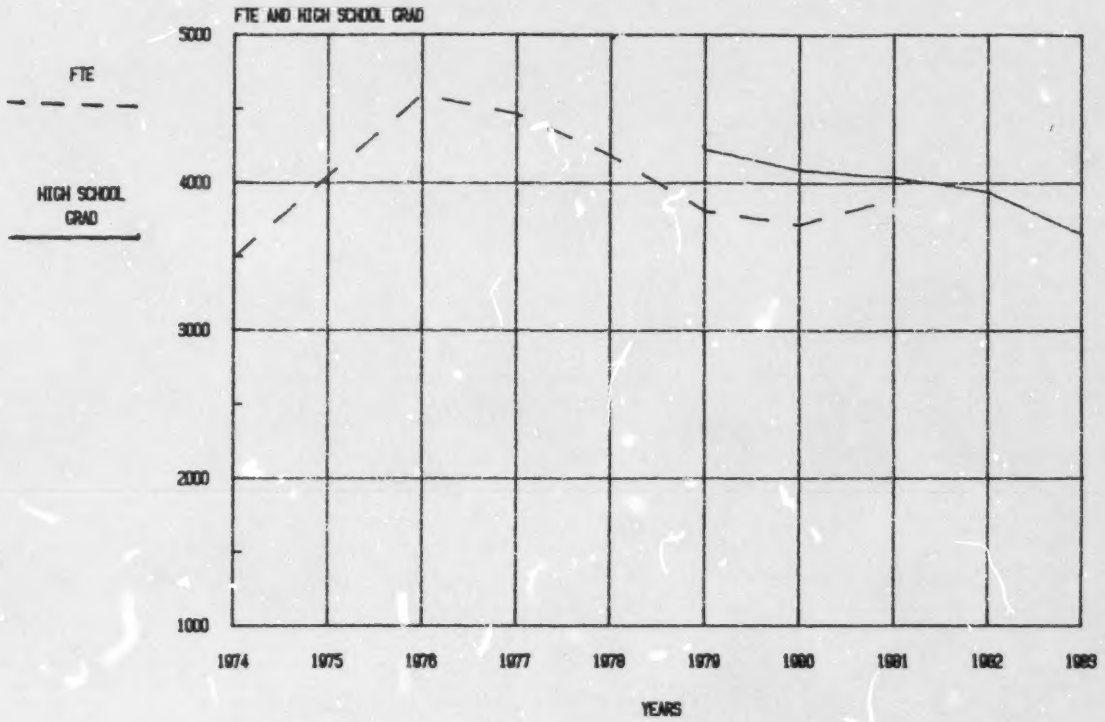
INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the development of a Retention Plan for a regional university that performs both the four year college and the community college roles. Cameron University is a state supported public institution located in Lawton, Oklahoma and provides higher education services to Southwest Oklahoma. Lawton has a population of 90,000 with a major military installation nearby which increases the population by 20,000. The remaining service area is primarily rural in nature. The military installation and to some extent the oil and gas industries create a large segment of transit students for the university. Cameron provides both associate and bachelor degree programs with a 3900 full-time equivalent (FTE) student body.

The motivation for the retention plan came from the faculty governance structure when they were asked for comments on a financial exigency policy and from the administration when it noted an FTE reduction of 19 per cent from 1977 to 1980. The FTE reduction appears to have been the result of the expiration of a veterans assistance program (GI Bill) and the elimination of on-duty educational programs by the Army. In addition, the projected decline in high school graduates was a factor in developing a retention plan. The faculty and the administration saw recruiting and retention as viable alternatives to financial exigency.

The full-time equivalent student load is shown by dashed line for 1974 through 1981, and the number of high school graduates from the region is shown by solid line in the following bar graph.

CAMERON FTE AND HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES



PURPOSE

The purposes of the Retention Plan are to quantify and qualify the retention problems and to establish action plans which will act in concert with the recruiting plan to simultaneously raise the quality of education, the quality of life and the number of full-time equivalent students at Cameron University. The specific FTE goal is to return the University to the 1976 level of 4,593 FTE students by 1985. The objectives are:

--To quantify and qualify attrition at Cameron.

--To isolate undesirable attrition and learn the causes.

--To identify feasible actions that will improve retention by enhancing quality of education and quality of life at Cameron.

--To prioritize retention actions on the basis of cost effectiveness.

--To create action plans to improve retention from the prioritized list.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A fairly extensive literature review was undertaken; however, the most current and useful references were developed by the American College Testing Program and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems. Two publications, What Works in Student Retention by Beal and Noel and Mobilizing for Campus Retention by Smith, Lippitt, Noel and Sprandel, provided a multitude of ideas, approaches and bibliographies. A major shortcoming in the literature is the lack of approaches to deal with non-traditional students who are predominately part-time students.

DATA SOURCES

Three primary sources of data were used. First, the university participates in a state wide computer supported unitized data system which contains a student data file. The student data file contains demographic, academic and additional miscellaneous data. Semester to semester comparisons can be made using these files. The second source of data was a 100% student survey conducted during Spring 1982 enrollment which gathered student data regarding educational goals, reasons for transfer plans, military status, work status and other data. This information was entered into the student data file. The third source of data was a survey of non-returning students from Fall 1981 to Spring 1982 semesters. The data from these three sources were placed into a Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) file and analyzed through various SPSS program routines.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology consisted of six steps which were: 1) Training of the plan director and literature review, 2) Quantifying and qualifying the attrition problems, 3) Determining the causes of undesirable attrition, 4) Identifying feasible courses of actions, 5) Prioritizing the actions and, 6) Developing action plans to reduce retention.

GENERAL

Numerous attrition and retention studies have been developed over the years by other universities but the major thrust, until recently, has been on the negative aspects of attrition and on the student. Only recently have the studies become more oriented on the positive aspects of retention and included the institutional changes that favorably impact retention. The approach taken in this plan is to focus on the favorable aspects of retention.

Cameron University has a good data processing capability when compared to peer universities; however, the data have not been gathered, filed or retained with the goal of addressing retention. The two most critical pieces of information--for what purposes do students come to Cameron and for what reasons do they leave--have not been gathered. Action was taken for the spring semester of 1982 to collect these data. Unfortunately, the data cannot be recreated for previous years; consequently, longitudinal data are not available.

FIRST STEP - TRAINING AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The first step consisted of project director training and literature review. The project director attended the National Forum of the Association for Institutional Research in the spring of 1981 and 1982 where many papers were presented on attrition and retention. In addition he attended a training seminar titled "Reducing the Dropout Rate" presented by The American College Testing (ACT) National Center in January 1982. Many studies were reviewed; however, the most useful literature was provided at the ACT seminar. Although the publications are not a recipe book to be followed in conducting an attrition study, they provide statistical norms, concepts and ideas to develop a logical study plan which fits Cameron's individual needs. The literature review precluded "reinventing the wheel" and provided a good foundation for developing the plan.

SECOND STEP - QUANTIFYING AND QUALIFYING THE ATTRITION PROBLEM

Because Cameron performs a function of a community college in addition to a senior college role, a simple student accounting system of beginning freshman, transfer students and graduates is not very meaningful. Many of the students attend Cameron to take courses for self-improvement or to improve job performance, to transfer to another university, to complete non-degree programs and other reasons that do not lead to graduation. The first issue is to determine for what purpose students attend Cameron and the second issue is why they depart. The first issue is important because an individual who attended Cameron with an educational goal of only taking a course or two should not be treated as an attrition statistic. Regarding the second issue, an individual who has a goal of obtaining a degree but is ordered to another station by the military may be treated as an attrition statistic but certainly Cameron has no control over the departure. These two examples illustrate the need to quantify and qualify attrition before the problem can be effectively addressed. This was done by conducting a 100 per cent survey at spring enrollment to determine the purpose for which each student was attending Cameron, by establishing the reasons for withdrawal from all withdrawing students, and by surveying all non-returning students from the fall to the spring semester. Since longitudinal data were not available regarding the students' purposes for attending Cameron, the senior class was evaluated to determine whether they were transfer students or had begun their college education at Cameron. These data were used to approximate the magnitude of the attrition problem and to subjectively identify the reasons for attrition.

THIRD STEP - IDENTIFYING FEASIBLE RETENTION ACTIONS

The tabulation of root causes in step three was used to identify various actions that could be taken to eliminate the problems. In this step the actions were separated into quality of education and quality of life actions. Potential

solutions were reviewed from the literature on the subject and the problems and suggestions generated in the other planning efforts.

FOURTH STEP - PRIORITIZE ACTIONS

This step placed the various retention actions in priority based on cost effectiveness. Each action was judgmentally evaluated on the basis of potential benefit, impact, success and demand to the university. The two vice-presidents of the university participated with the planning office in this step.

FIFTH STEP - DEVELOPMENT OF ACTION PLANS TO REDUCE RETENTION

The action plans were written based on the priority list in step five. The action plans establish what is to be done, who is to do it, when they are to do it, some aspects of how they are to do it, and the resources required to accomplish the tasks.

RESULTS

(RETENTION PROFILE)

The basic purpose of developing an attrition/retention profile was to determine if Cameron had an attrition problem and, if so, the magnitude of the problem. This task seemed simple on the surface but it became more difficult and complex as the data began to unfold. Startling figures, when taken at face value, seemed to be contradictory. A dramatic example of this concern is the information that reflects 451 full-time freshman versus 508 full-time senior students who are pursuing a bachelor's degree versus 28 per cent of the student body who did not return from one semester to the next. A great deal of research was necessary to rationalize how an institution can have more full-time seniors than freshman (reverse attrition) and at the same time suffer a non-return rate of nearly one-third of the student body from one semester to the next. A major research university would be ecstatic with more seniors than freshman, and they would have grave concern if they lost one-third of their student body from one semester to the next. For a communi-

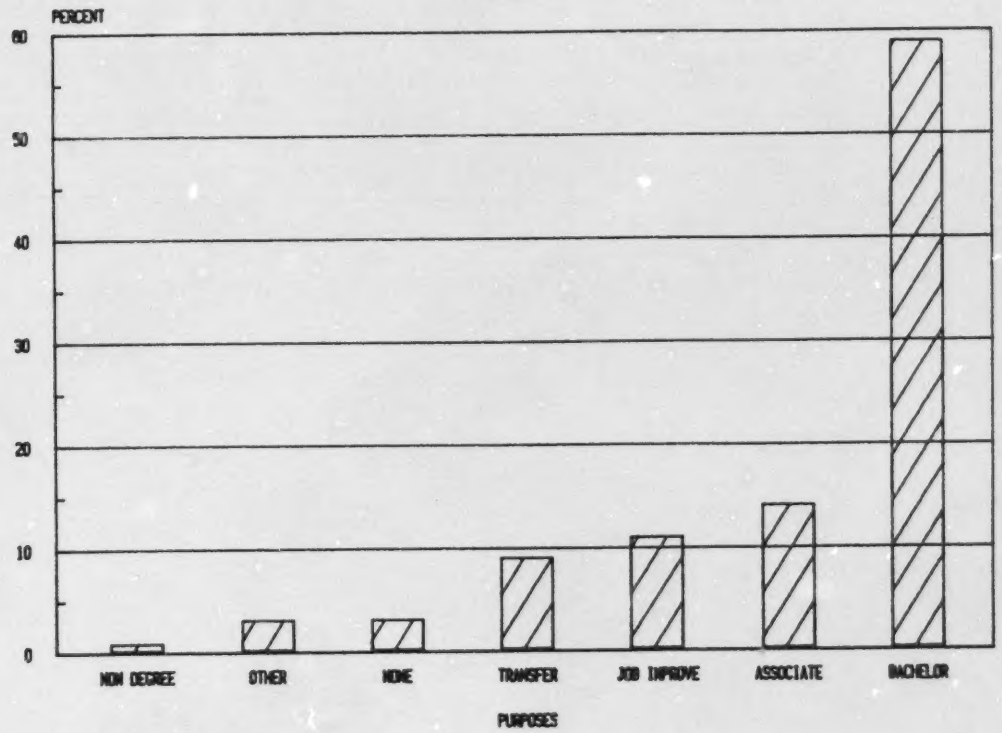
ty college or a regional university to have these statistics may be meaningless. The most important message that this paper brings to the reader is the necessity to develop a clear student profile before assuming an attrition problem. The magnitude of the effort to define the problem should not be underestimated if the attrition/retention subjects are being addressed for the first time.

Some of the profile information that was developed to explain the above example will be presented below. The mission and functions of an institution and the make-up of the student body will lead the researcher into the need for developing different information than was needed by Cameron. Unfortunately, an institution may find it difficult, and probably impossible, to project the specific information needs before initiating a retention study if the study is the first retention effort.

The most important student information is the reason for attendance at the institution. Although it may seem strange that the information is not available, many institutions do not collect the purpose for attending or the data are very inaccurate and out of date. If it is not known why the student is attending the institution, the attrition status can usually not be determined when they depart. A major problem is the students' constantly changing purposes. Cameron has now added this information to the enrollment form and the purpose for attending is obtained at each enrollment. The results for the spring semester 1982 follow:

PURPOSE FOR ATTENDING CAMERON

SPRING 1982



This bar graph reflects that 59 per cent of the students are at Cameron for senior college programs while 41 per cent are here for community college programs. These data indicate that a large percentage of the non-returning students should not be treated as an attrition statistic against a BS or BA degree since 41% are not pursuing a 4 year degree program.

In the same survey, the students' association with the military and their work status were determined. The results were:

	Per cent
Not associated with military	54
Associated with military	46
Active duty	(11)
Dependent of active duty	(10)
Retired	(6)
Widow of veteran	(1)
Dependent fo veteran	(2)
Drawing veteran benefits	(13)

	Per cent
Did not work	33
Did work	67
Part-time	(29)
Full-time	(38)

The above information reflects that 11 per cent are active duty personnel and subject to direct military orders while another 10 per cent are their dependents. The majority of these dependents accompany the active duty sponsor when the sponsor departs. These active duty personnel and their dependents contribute heavily to Cameron's apparent attrition. By the same token, the military population at Fort Sill has remained fairly constant over the last four years which means that departing active duty personnel and their dependents are replaced with incoming people, and Cameron gains new or transfer students. Many of the incoming people have previously attended Cameron and re-enroll to pursue their education goals.

The large percentage of students who work conveys that our student population is in need of economic assistance to attend college; however, the 38 per cent of the student body who work full-time is surprising and significantly contributes to the attrition statistics. Eleven per cent of this group are the active duty military, but that leaves another 27 per cent who are working full-time in civilian occupations and pursuing education goals at Cameron.

Other information generated from the student files in conjunction with this survey was the number of full-time versus part-time students. The results were:

	Per cent
Part-time	43
Full-time	57

Over the last few years the percentage of part-time students has been increasing. No reasons for this shift have been identified.

The above information led Cameron to review the transfer status of the senior level students with the following results:

Seniors	Per cent
Seniors who have transferred to Cameron	52
Seniors who have not transferred to Cameron	48

If the number of freshmen and seniors are nearly equal (see comments in previous paragraph) and over 50% of the seniors are transfer students, then approximately 50% of the freshmen were lost due to attrition to make the totals of freshmen and seniors the same. Longitudinal data must be generated over the years to provide for tracking individual students to verify these data, but the data are adequate to accept the fact that there is a large attrition rate in the bachelor degree students that must be addressed.

The above information and comments illustrate how a regional university can have more full-time seniors than freshman who are pursuing a bachelor's degree. Having developed this background, the next major data gathering effort was to determine why 28 per cent of the student body did not return from the fall 1981 semester to the spring 1982 semester.

The approach was to survey the non-returning students using a mailed questionnaire. A telephone follow-up was used to increase the return rate. A non-returning list of students from Fall '81 to Spring '82 semesters was produced by the computer. The student list contained the social security number, name, telephone number, address, sex, race, accumulated credit hours and GPA, semester credit hours and GPA and the student probation or suspension status. All names, addresses, phone numbers, and SSN were placed in the word processor and a personalized questionnaire was prepared for each student, except those who had been suspended. The total population consisted of 1400 names. The questionnaire was designed to ask for the minimum information; the size was small enough to be returned for post card postage when folded; and it required no postage from the respondent. A personal letter from the president accompanied the questionnaire. Enclosure 1 contains a sample of the letter and questionnaire.

The return rate of the completed questionnaire was 18% (252 ÷ 1400). There were 10% (137) of the envelopes returned with forwarding addresses that indicated the students had moved outside our region (beyond commuting distance). Many of these students were associated with the military. The goal was to account for at least one-third of the population. To accomplish this goal, telephone interviews were conducted until the status of another 8% (118) of the students had been determined. Calls were made so that one-third of the students in each academic major had returns. The telephone interviews were conducted using the same questionnaire; however, the information was accepted from other adults that personnally knew the students if the student was not availabie. A recapitulation of the returns follows:

	Number	Per cent
Total population	1400	100
Written questionnaire returns	252	18
Address indicating moved from area	137	10
Telephone survey	118	8
Total returns	507	36

The results of the telephone survey and the written returns were tabulated separately and compared. Although minor differences occurred, the only significant difference was the smaller percentage of students reporting they had departed the area from the group that was called. This bias was expected. Long distance calls within the state were made, but not out of state. No assumptions were made regarding a telephone number that was not working or no one answering the call. There were no other biases that suggested the two sources of data were not compatible; therefore, written and telephone responses were treated the same in the analysis. The literature on attrition studies indicates poor response rates from non-returning students and Cameron's results bore this out.

A code for the student's responses was developed, and a computer file was created to record each student's information. Data from the student master file including classification (Freshman, Sophmore, Junior, Senior, Special), GPA,

education goal, age, ACT, sex, race, discipline (major) and type of admission (high school, GED, transfer, other) were transferred to the survey file so cross tabulations could be made, The entire file was set up so it could be used with the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). All data were analyzed using SPSS.

The SPSS cross tabulations allowed comparisons between the overall student body versus the survey population such as age, sex, race, grade point average, work status, full-time student status and others. Only the most relevant will be discussed in this paper.

The purpose for attending Cameron was included in the non-returning student questionaire. The results were similar to the overall student body responses of enrollment except 20 per cent more responded with self/job improvement and 22 per cent less were seeking a bachelor's degree. Fifty-eight per cent of the non-returning students versus 38 per cent of the overall student body worked full-time. The per cent of active duty military and their dependents was 37 versus 21 in the overall student body.

An open-ended question was asked on the questionnaire to determine the reasons for the students not re-enrolling at Cameron. The reasons ran the gamut of possibilities and they were judgmentally coded into the following categories with the number of responses listed after each category:

Moved	174	Attending another college	13
Written responses	(37)	Took courses for fun	11
Forwarding address out of region	(137)	Other	9
Work conflict	117	Married	8
Personal reasons	44	Transportation problem	8
Sickness	34	Rest from school	8
Financial	31	Class not offered at night	6
Busy	28	Low GPA	3
Degree/Courses not offered	28	Class size	1
Graduated	21	TOTAL	545

Students were not restricted, except by space, in the number of reasons offered for not re-enrolling. The 545 reasons were offered by 370 respondents plus the 137

who had moved out of the region. When these reasons are compared to a literature review of attrition studies conducted by other universities, the results are generally the same if the first two--"moved and work conflict"--are disregarded. In most studies the "moved" reason is not even listed as a factor. In the case of Cameron, the moved reason represents 34% of the 507 responses (includes returned addresses out of region). The work conflict reasons in the literature vary considerably between senior colleges where they are likely to be relatively insignificant to community and junior colleges, where they may account for 15 to 20 per cent of the respondents. The Cameron survey reflects 32% (117 ÷ 370 - the 137 returned envelopes with addresses out of region were removed) of the respondents who cited work conflict as a reason. The Cameron abnormality of the "moved" and "work conflict" reasons, when compared to other college and university results, are attributed to the large military student population, the gas and oil industries and the large number of part-time, night students who are working full or part-time.

Each respondent was asked if they planned to re-enroll. The results follow:

	Number	Per cent
Do you plan to re-enroll[17]		
Yes	150	43
Maybe	142	40
No	61	17
TOTAL	353	100

The most encouraging aspect of the survey was the large number of respondents who plan to re-enroll or may re-enroll. Only 61 (17%) of the respondents have made a firm decision not to re-enroll. In the GPA cross tabulation, 88% of those who plan to return had GPAs above 2.0 and 85% of those who may return had GPAs above 2.0.

An SPSS computer run reflected that only 11 per cent of the non-returning students were full-time students while 89 per cent were part-time students. There

were 2954 full-time students in the fall of 1981 which computes to a small 5 per cent attrition factor for full-time students.

The above discussions, regarding the reverse attrition indication of more seniors than freshman pursuing a bachelor's degree on a full-time basis and the non-returning student rate of 28 per cent from one semester to the next, create a student profile that provides insights into the attrition problem which assist the decision makers in selecting a retention philosophy and appropriate action plans. When the percentage of students who have moved, those with work conflicts and those who will or may return are put into context, the attrition statistic of 28 per cent non-returning from one semester to the next can be moved from the area of crisis concern to a concern of normal dimensions.

Numerous other data and information gathering efforts were accomplished in connection with this study such as review of a needs assessment, two faculty surveys and the American College Testing results. All contributed to the overall body of knowledge regarding attrition.

CONCLUSIONS

Attrition and retention are elusive subjects for all colleges and universities because of the vacillating goals of their students. Colleges and universities such as Cameron, that have community college responsibilities, find the quantification of attrition even more difficult because of the numerous students who are pursuing educational goals other than a degree. In addition to the student goals problem, Cameron has not filed or retained the data regarding attrition in a manner conducive to developing longitudinal attrition information. Despite the challenge of vacillating student goals and the data shortcomings, the above section dealing with results presents convincing information that Cameron has an attrition problem that should be addressed. The general overall conclusion follows:

The overall conclusion from the plan is that Cameron University must take aggressive retention actions to stem the attrition problem. Although the student headcount is remaining relatively level, the number of new students who must be enrolled each semester to off-set the non-returning students is exceptionally large. The turnover of students represents significant resource costs to the university and unfulfilled goal achievements by the students. It is also concluded that the part-time, non-traditional students are creating most of the attrition, and retention actions should be primarily directed toward this group of students. Attrition is not so significant that crisis retention actions are dictated but a well planned, well executed program is essential to achieve enrollment goals and maintain quality education.

Another conclusion is that a management approach for retention programs must be instituted to assure that new ideas and programs are developed and to conduct evaluations so that progress can be measured.

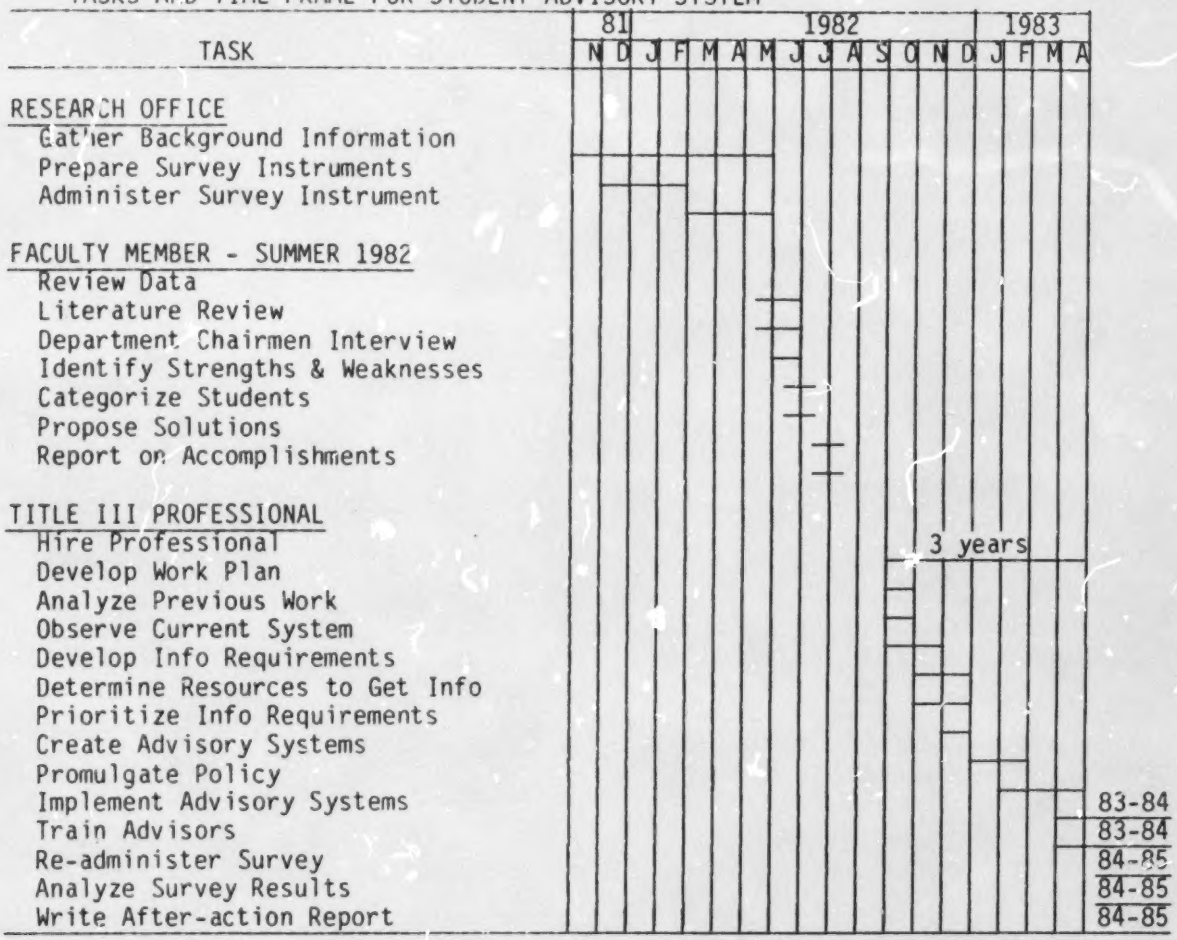
The last conclusion is that initial action plans should be proposed so that projects can begin in the immediate future. These action programs consist of the following:

Improve Quality of Life
- Create task force for retention
- Initiate behavioral training
- Conduct faculty/staff orientation
- Create non-traditional student organization
- Establish written admin policies
- Organize faculty/staff coffee calls
- Present university information sessions

Revise Student Advisement
Create Basic Skills Program
Modify Student Orientation
Establish Retention Responsibilities
Establish Retention Data Base
Determine Night Course Needs

The action plans were written as appendixes to the basic plan. Each action plan contained goals, objectives, background, approach (methodology), tasks and time frame and resources paragraphs. The action plans clearly state who, what, where, when and to some degree how, so the responsibility is clear. The action plans were coordinated with the action agency prior to publishing the plan. An example of the tasks and time frame chart for designing and implementing a new student advisory system follows:

TASKS AND TIME FRAME FOR STUDENT ADVISORY STSTEM



IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS AND THEORETICIANS

All too often universities develop plans which gather dust on the shelves because the plan does not contain the who, what, where, when and how aspects to accomplish the goals and objectives. Cameron has taken the approach that the supporting plans to the overall university plan must contain action plans. Specifically, the action plans contain the individual department and office responsibilities, the time schedules and the resource requirements to accomplish the plan. The recruiting plan for Cameron which was written in 1981 contained the same action plans approach. The university increased enrollment by 10% for the

fall semester of 1982 which attest to this methodology. Hopefully, practitioners will obtain many ideas from this paper about the methodology, challenges and solutions for retention in a multifaceted university with both traditional and non-traditional students. Theoreticians should recognize that the literature which devotes untold volumes to describing, categorizing and developing statistics regarding the profile of students who drop-out of college should begin a concentration on what universities can change to enhance retention with emphasis on the non-traditional students.

CAMERON UNIVERSITY

Office of the President

2800 West Gore
Lawton, Oklahoma
73505-6377

May 20, 1982

Dear :

Our records indicate you were enrolled at Cameron University during the 1981 fall semester. In an effort to better serve our constituents, we are surveying all students who did not re-enroll. The attached survey will serve two purposes:

-- To determine why you did not re-enroll this spring.

-- To identify ways that we can improve Cameron to meet your needs.

I am especially interested in hearing from you so we can identify problems and develop solutions. Your responses will be confidential and will not have an effect on your relationship with Cameron.

The questionnaire is very short, and it will require only a few minutes to complete. Please complete it, FOLD IT WITH THE CAMERON ADDRESS ON THE OUTSIDE, staple or tape it closed and drop it into the mail box (no stamp is required).

By completing the questionnaire, you will be doing the community a service by helping us improve Cameron University.

Thank you,

Don Davis
President

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Enclosure I

(405) 248-2200, ext. 200

	Please make address corrections here.

1. Are you currently attending Cameron? Yes☐ No☐ If yes, please return this questionnaire without completing the rest of the questions.

2. For what purpose were you attending Cameron University (select only one)?
   a. ☐ No definite purpose in mind.
   b. ☐ To take courses for self-improvement or to improve job performance.
   c. ☐ To take courses for the purpose of transferring to another university.
   d. ☐ To complete a non-degree program.
   e. ☐ To obtain an associate's degree.
   f. ☐ To obtain a bachelor's degree.
   g. ☐ Other. Please specify. _____

3. Have you transferred to another university? Yes☐ No☐

4. Briefly describe your reasons for not attending Cameron._____

   _____

   _____

5. Do you plan to re-enroll? Yes☐ Maybe☐ No☐ If so, when? _____

6. What can Cameron do to encourage you to re-enroll? _____

   _____

7. In your opinion, what are the three most important things that Cameron should change to help you achieve your education goal.

   a. _____

   b. _____

   c. _____

8. Were you active duty military or a dependent of active duty military while attending Cameron? Yes☐ No☐ . Did your association with the military have any bearing on you not re-enrolling? Yes☐ No☐ .

9. Were you employed while attending Cameron? Yes☐ No☐ .
   Part-Time☐ Full-Time☐ .